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## POLITICO

## Senate takes its own path on CR

By: [David Rogers](#)

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Caught between a diffident president and hostile House speaker, Senate Democrats took a page from Irish politics Monday night — and swung back at both.

That's the true bottom line to a stopgap spending bill filed by the Appropriations Committee leadership late in the evening — a 587-page measure designed to avert any shutdown March 27 and map a six-month path forward for agencies in the wake of sequestration.

The product of long, sometimes tortured bipartisan talks, the Senate bill greatly expands on the hybrid continuing resolution passed by the House last week. Full-year budgets for four Cabinet departments are added together with provisions impacting everything from hundreds of millions in highway funding to Head Start for poor children and new U.S. aid for Syrian rebels.

Behind the numbers is also a political lesson — aptly timed the week before St. Patrick's Day.

(Also on POLITICO: [Ryan budget targets Obamacare, oil drilling](#))

President Barack Obama is denied added money he wanted for health care and Wall Street reforms — a penalty born of Democratic frustration with this White House's diffidence toward the appropriations machinery that funds its agenda.

At the same time, Speaker John Boehner isn't spared: The bill directly challenges the Ohio Republican by calling his bluff on his threat to put the whole government back under a punishing regime if the Senate should get "greedy."

In both cases, the dynamics reflect a newly more assertive Senate Appropriations leadership trying to climb back into contention after being kicked to the curb in the last Congress.

Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski is the driving force. The Maryland Democrat hammered out Monday's bill together with her ranking Republican, Alabama Sen. Richard Shelby, who signed off Monday evening after resolving a last dispute related to transfer authority for the Commodity Futures Trading Commission.

The bill itself, an amendment in the nature of a substitute for the House CR, bears the names of both senators.

The question now is whether this partnership can light a spark across the Capitol, and prompt House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-Ky.) to be more assertive with his own leadership.

Appropriations Republicans winced last week when Boehner made his threat at a televised press conference. To put the whole government back under a CR — as the speaker suggested — would be devastating for the military services. It would also undo what Rogers tried to accomplish by giving the Defense Department a full-year budget with more money for operations.

The Kentucky Republican is already under siege from House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), who is demanding the lowest appropriations numbers possible as part of his 10-year fiscal plan to be released Tuesday. To this degree, Rogers might welcome a more assertive Senate to give him some leverage with his leadership.

Mikulski must first get across the Senate floor this week but with Shelby by her side, she

has a fair shot at getting the 60 votes needed to win passage. This sets up House-Senate talks, and Rogers's staff has already been working with Shelby's during the Senate negotiations. If Boehner were to insist on going back to a stripped-down CR, he would risk a real uproar.

Indeed, both House and Senate appropriators are still struggling with the new reality of the March 1 sequester order.

Measured in real, inflation-adjusted dollars, total discretionary spending for 2013 is expected to be even lower than 2005, when Obama's predecessor, President George W. Bush, was beginning his own second term. Core non-defense appropriations will be even lower than Ryan's budget sought last year at this time.

The conventional political wisdom in Washington is that the cuts are here to stay. But the crunch on military operations is still severe — even under a full-year budget. Higher costs in Afghanistan have contributed to what many see as a real shortfall in overseas contingency funds.

Having raised alarms, the administration appears content to sit back now and let the cuts be felt. This is alarming to some in the Appropriations Committees, who fear the operations of government are being sacrificed to a political standoff.

With an estimated \$31 billion budget, the National Institutes of Health face a cut of about \$1.5 billion under sequestration. The Senate bill's additional funds — \$71 million — seem to be more a symbol in this context.

Justice, Agriculture, Commerce and Homeland Security are the four departments which benefit the most together with the Food and Drug Administration and major science agencies like NASA and NSF.

A dispute of California's high-speed rail project blocked Mikulski from adding Transportation and Housing and Urban Development. But her bill will allow increased spending for road and rail projects in accordance with the MAP-21 authorization bill adopted in the last Congress.

Proponents of the language argue that the cost of these transportation expenditures has already been accounted for in the authorization bill. But the total impact is substantial, freeing up between \$500 million and \$700 million for highway and transit spending.

In the case of the State Department, the Senate, like the House, allows for up to \$2 billion in increased funding, offset by cuts elsewhere, for embassy security in the wake of the Benghazi attack in 2012. But the Senate bill goes further by also updating funding for global health programs to fight AIDS and malaria. And Secretary of State John Kerry is given the flexibility to access an additional \$50 million to provide nonlethal assistance to Syrian rebels.

"At a time when many doubt Congress can accomplish anything at all," Shelby said, "this agreement is a very clear demonstration of our commitment to work together."